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TRYING TO EXIT HERE

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master Of Fine Arts at Virginia Commonwealth University.

by

LEIGH SUGGS
Bachelor of Fine Arts, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 2003

Director: SUSAN IVERSON
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Virginia Commonwealth University
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May, 2015

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TRYING TO EXIT HERE

By Leigh Suggs, MFA

A Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts at Virginia Commonwealth University.

Virginia Commonwealth University, 2015

Major Director: Susan Iverson
Professor, Craft/Material Studies

There is an in-between space during the act of seeing. The in-between space lies on the spectrum of the reality in front of us and what our brain tells us. It is within this suspended moment an individual can experience an unaltered and unaffected vision. While this moment is fleeting, it defines the highest peak of personal experience. It is my belief no two people will ever experience the same vision during this suspended time. And after it passes, the sigh/vision can never be the same. We are constantly bearing witness to the inexpressive, and this fleeting moment is something in which we should all revel.

CAN WE TRUST OUR EYES

Our visual system - the eyes, the optic nerves, the parts of the brain used for sight - creates a *representation* of what we see. These representations leave our eyes with a lot of responsibility to interpret what we see. Our eyes identify and categorize objects; assess the distance of objects to self and other objects, and assist with guiding our body movements in relation to these objects. As information travels through the eyes and across the optic nerve, it gets crossed, paralleled, and then sent to the brain for interpretation. While I am not specifically concerned with the scientific aspects of seeing, I am highly aware of the opportunity for interference or intervention by the brain to change or alter what we are seeing. Can we trust our eyes?

There is an in-between space during the act of seeing. That space lies on the spectrum of the reality in front of us and what our brain tells us. It is within this space that a suspended moment exists. This moment is an unaltered, unaffected, and unchanged vision. While this "purity" can only exist for a fleeting second, it defines the highest peak of personal experience. After this moment passes, the sight/vision can never be the same.

I believe no two people see alike, or even come close to having the same experience. I believe and trust in the individual experience as a human and I distrust the motives and constructs of science, physics, language, art or visual images. While these

things do assist in humankind having a universal understanding, they each begin to interfere with our collective and shared experience of seeing.

When I first asked myself if I trusted my eyes, I immediately answered the question without reservations, as NO. Why would anyone trust eyes that are subjectively taking in information passing him or her by at an alarming rate? Bits and pieces of information are constantly missed or lost. Science tells us our eyes only see part of the light spectrum. And it is understood when it is dark, eyes cannot see. Outside of human shortcomings, other objects often block most of what people see, and the brain receives incomplete visual information. A recent study completed at the University of Toronto proved without the brain filling in information, humans would have a difficult time coping with their surroundings. This universal understanding of our environment is crucial. "People take perception for granted because it seems so instant and automatic to us," says Allison Sekuler, associate professor of psychology at University of Toronto and one of the study's senior authors. "What many people don't realize is that the objects we see are not necessarily the same as the information that reaches our eyes, so the brain needs to fill in those gaps of missing information."[1] Therefore, the eyes and brain force us to have trust. Trust in this case, also implies that there can be distrust, and it could be in the form of missing things or mis-interpreting things. Trust allows empathy and faith between individuals. As I have progressed through my research with this question, I am no longer

[1] Sekuler, Allison, University of Toronto, June 2, 2000 *Discovery Shows How Brain "Fills In Blanks" To Help Us See* http://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2000/06/000601164617.htm

sure if the answer is as simple and definitive as NO. The trust and empathy we have with one another is slippery.

To approach the notion of this suspended moment – or what I will call "pure" seeing, it is important to define sight and the act of seeing. To have *sight* (the noun, the sense), is to have the faculty or the power to see. Or it can mean a thing one sees or a thing that can be seen. The verb *sight* can mean to catch an initial glimpse of someone or something. The act of seeing makes one capable of processing information through the human visual system. It also means light is perceived through the same visual system. As it might be arguable from an optometrist, physicist, or even a color theorist, without light, it is impossible to see.

Light constantly interferes with sight and the act of seeing. This interference is a topic that could be expanded on indefinitely, but to briefly explain my interpretation, light is an actor in our consciousness of seeing. Light can take the roll of positive or negative. If light is added, it makes objects clearer or brings our attention to them. If too much light is added, it over saturates an object and can even blind the viewer. If subtracted, it can push things into the background and make them appear duller. And if light is completely removed, objects can seemingly cease to exist. "How indeed can one observe and record light? The same light that is the precondition for vision – is a blinding force that can leave one in darkness."[2]

[2] Cross, Susan (Curator of show and wrote essay for Catalog), *What Time Is It On The Sun? – Spencer Finch*, Catalog from MASS MoCA, Published with the assistance of the Getty Foundation, 2008

In this way, light and darkness assist in the perception of objects and color, and act as equals. Light assists in the bringing forth, and darkness helps in the setting down (gives an object or color "heaviness" or "weight" we attribute to gravity and location). But, light is invisible. One is only aware of light when it strikes something. We do not see light; we see an object that has been struck by light. And still, the human eye only sees a small amount of visible light on the visual spectrum and even within this spectrum, too much or too little can completely change perspectives.

What happens when light is not in the equation? Is it still possible to have sight or to see objects? I argue it is possible to have sight and still see something without the interference of light. This can come in many ways, but I will focus on phosphenes, a type of closed eye hallucination, and visual types of synesthesia.

If the definitions of sight and seeing expand, they should include visual consciousness of objects and environments - being aware that you *are* aware of objects and environments. This does not mean that visual consciousness includes seeing something clearly. An object or environment can be blurry or distorted and it still read as an object or environment. Also, one can look at an object quickly on a table, know its location, look away and not forget its location. Achieving visual consciousness of an object can happen without it needing to be in our immediate field of vision. I would also argue blind people have visual consciousness. Visual consciousness can come in the form of other perceptual

awareness for a blind person. Knowing an object is near can simply be a sensory experience or a psychological experience.

A recent study by Gilles Vandewalle and his colleagues at the University of Montreal suggests "light does affect important brain functions—even in the absence of vision. Alternatively, the study shows that light triggers a quick neural reaction even in blind people." It was previously thought blind people could respond to light but it had to be through longer exposures (30 minutes or more). Vandewalle's study used an MRI to show the brains recognition of light stimuli even without the photoreceptors that are necessary for sight. [3]

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[3] Gilles Vandewalle, University of Montreal
http://www.nature.com/scientificamericanmind/journal/v25/n3/full/scientificamericanmind0514-19b.html

EARLY VISIONS

I have very few memories from my childhood, but I can easily recall the patterns, shapes, and colors that I used to see behind my eyelids. I remember closing my eyes, just so I could see the usually radiant blue circles and dots that would undulate and pulse within the darkness. Moving faster than my eye could keep up with, I constantly chased these patterns. My fascination with these visions, the comfort they brought me, and the fact that I no longer "see" the patterns, are what drive my obsessive and relentless need to recall them.

These visions and my interpretations of them are repeated shapes, most often circles, dots, or lines that create the idea of a circle. Similarly to the works of Yayoi Kusama or Sam Messenger, the obsessive repetition hints at the reproduction of a fixated memory or hallucination. The imagery is unobtrusive, but intensified by the accretion of my chosen materials. Even though the imagery is abstract, it can also be analogous to a landscape, biomorphic form, or cellular cross section. The work shows a sense of self-control without hiding the inherent flaws or mistakes that can be made when something is produced by hand.

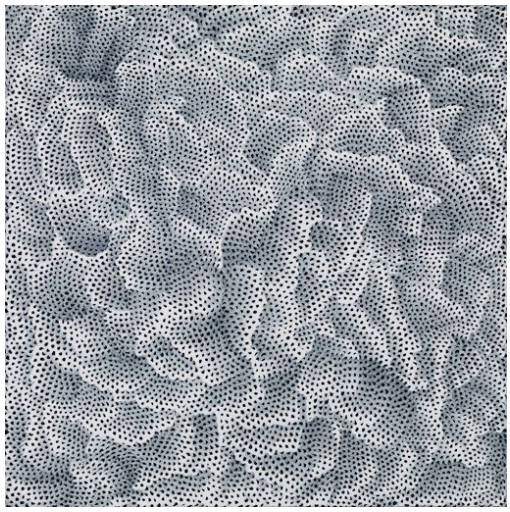

Fig. 1 *Infiniti Net* byYayoi Kusama

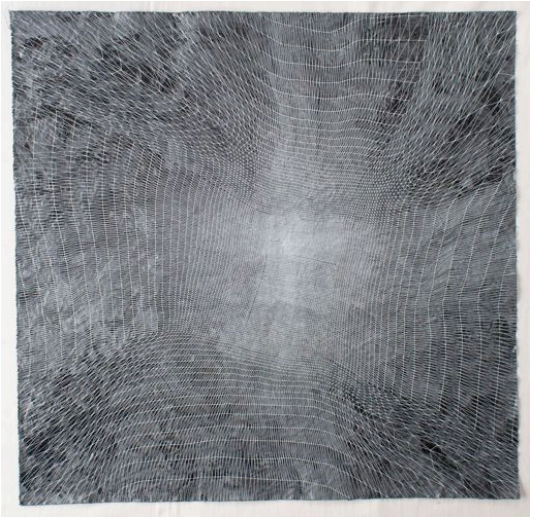

Fig. 2 *Admetus* by Sam Messenger

The circle (or dot) has countless meanings, but for me it represents the never-ending shape or object, the perpetual chase for completion or perfection. It is both zero-dimensional and infinitely dimensional. It seems to have no height, no width, and no length. As such, the circles go beyond shape, object, and even pattern, existing in their own right as an organic collective – just like my hallucinations and my memories of them.

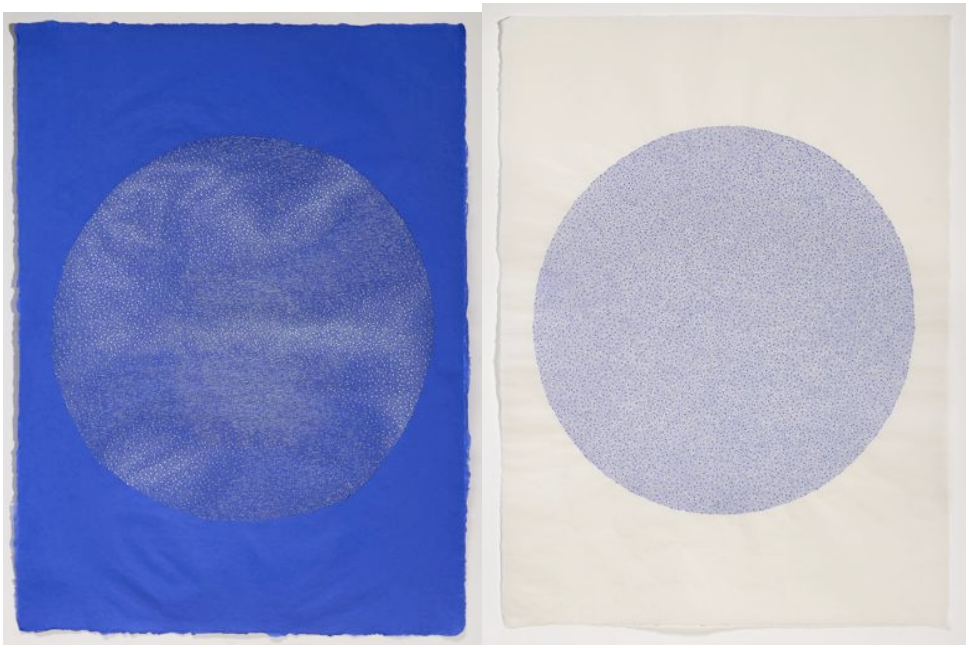

Fig. 3 & 4: *Staring Straight Into Nothing/ Staring Straight Into Something,* 2013

Fig. 5: DETAIL *of Staring Straight Into Nothing,* 2013

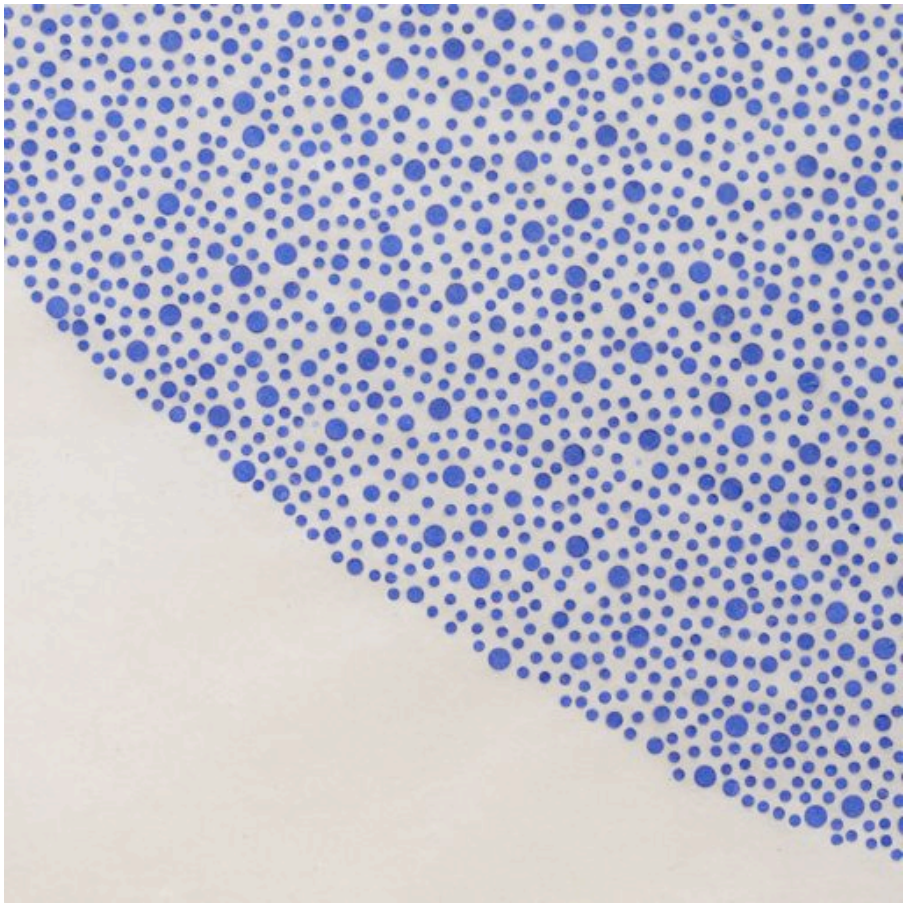

Fig. 6: *DETAIL of Staring Straight Into Something,* 2013

NAMELESS VISIONS

My mother, the woman who taught me how to experience the world, is a synesthete. She has one of the most common forms of synesthesia, grapheme-color, which means she reads in color. All of the letters of the alphabet have a specific corresponding color for her. The colors remain the same, even when fonts change or whether the letters are lower case or upper case. She has seen her letters this way since she can remember, but it was not until her mid-twenties that she realized not everyone saw the same way she did. A casual comment to her roommate about her A's being red quickly changed into a much more serious discussion, and my mother's understanding of her own perceptions changed forever.

The strong associations my mother has to color should be of no surprise because they have more than one meaning to her (one being the actual knowledge of a color and the other an association to a letter). The specificity of her colored alphabet is unique to only my mother; the chances of another synesthete having the same color to letter associations are very low[4]. I often wonder how her perception of color was imprinted on me. While

[4] Richard Cytowic , MD and David M. Eagleman, PhD *Wednesday Is Indigo Blue: Discovering The Brain of Synesthesia*, p.63 "The color associations for each grapheme differ for each synesthete and typically have very precise hues."

synesthesia is typically genetic[5], I do not read in color. But I am sure her perceptions transferred to me in other ways.

In an attempt to understand my mother's experience, I had her decode her alphabet for me by using paint chips that best described each letter. She explained her way of "seeing" to me as, "I see every letter in black at first, but if I focus, it quickly becomes color. Black does not stay in the letter in my mind. Letters stay the same in say French or Spanish but in Chinese or Japanese they stay black." [6] I first understood her description to mean the physical properties of the letter on the page changed. But the more I pondered her statements; I realized a psychological transformation happens. Her synesthetic colors are clearly differential from the outside world of colors (meaning she knows the green of the letter C is not in any way similar to "green" grass). The colors on a page do not hold a location on the page, like the "green" does to a blade of grass. According to David Starr Jordan, "It has been misunderstood by writers, who have imagined that the peculiar individuals having this trait actually see the color on the letter, which is not the fact. It is a mental association, not a false vision."[7] He also states, "The coloration does not seem to lie in the letter itself, as printed or written, but to coexist with the conception which the letter represents."[8]

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[5] Richard Cytowic , MD and David M. Eagleman, PhD *Wednesday Is Indigo Blue: Discovering The Brain of Synesthesia*, p.11 "Given recent advances, synesthesia may be the the first *perceptual* condition for which a gene can be discovered. It appears that synesthetic perception results from a heritable overinteraction between different areas of the brain."

[6] Recorded in email correspondence between Leigh Suggs and Marianne Suggs, dated September 5, 2013

[7] David Starr Jordan was the founding president of Stanford University, and documented his own experiences with grapheme color synesthsia in several essays and publications. His most well known essay "The Colors of Letters" originally published in 1917 in Science 46, p,311-312. http://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Popular_Science_Monthly/Volume_39/July_1891/The_Colors_of_Letters

[8] http://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Popular_Science_Monthly/Volume_39/July_1891/The_Colors_of_Letters

Fig. 7: *VACANT TOUCH,* 2013

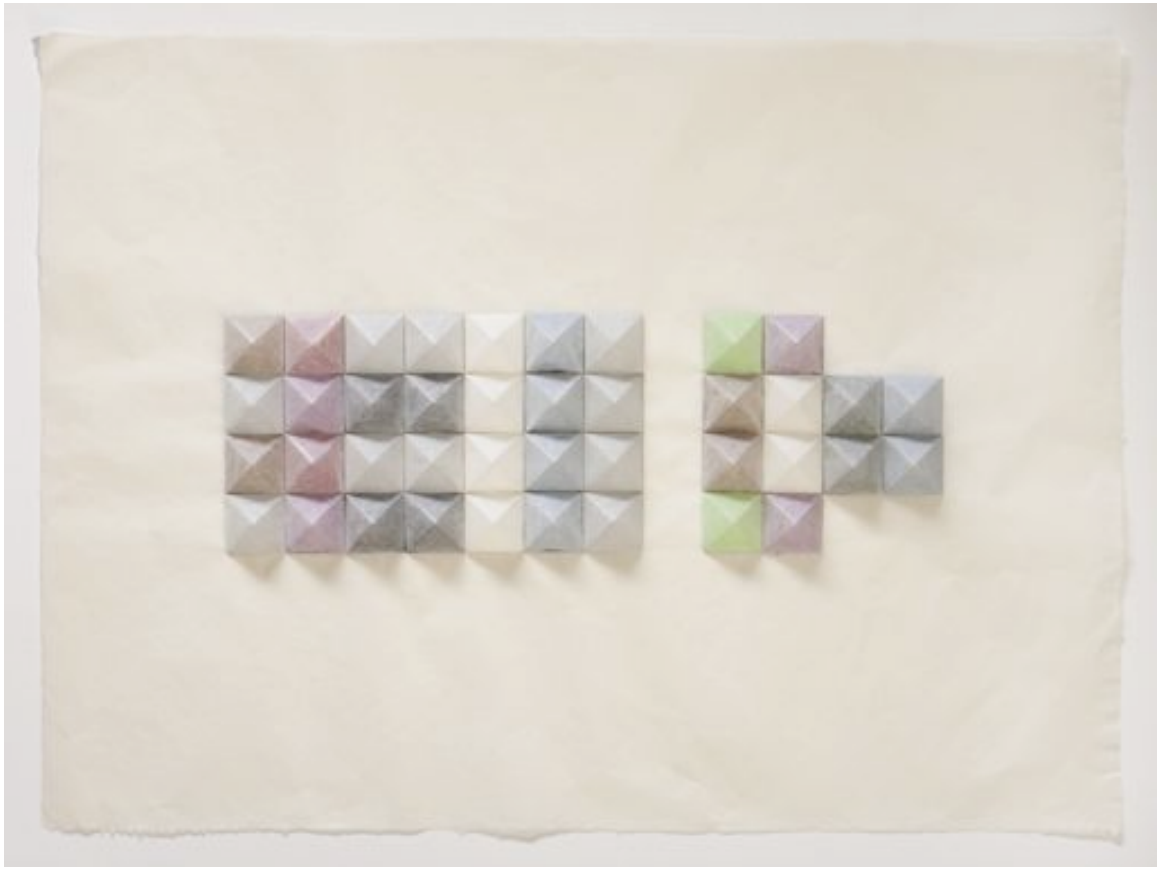

Fig. 8: *FALLING UP / GETTING DOWN / FALLING DOWN / GETTING UP,* 2013

Fig. 9: DETAIL - *FALLING UP / GETTING DOWN / FALLING DOWN / GETTING UP,* 2013

ATTEMPTS AT UNDERSTANDING (MARIANNE)

My relationship with my mother has always been challenged by our difficulties in communicating. She grew up in a family where talking about things were considered a weakness. As the oldest of five children, my mother spent most of her childhood taking care of her younger brothers, and never really stopped to understand what was happening in her own life. The only way out was to work hard, go to college, and support herself.

My mother works constantly, whether it is at her job/career or in her garden. I suppose I never felt comfortable interrupting her hard work because I always knew it was very important to her.

The conflict of properly communicating with my mother brought the idea of attempting to use other methods of communication like her own colored alphabet or Morse Code. What if we could understand each other better by using her personal graphemes or other "silent" modes of communication? In these instances, only my mother could read or understand the color, and maybe someone else could understand the message if the person could read or see Morse Code.

I So Do Not Want Any Of This For Any Of Us [fig.10] deals specifically with translation and communication through the use of color and texture. A stretched rope with a linear series of knots and various lengths of colored yarn divides the room. If counted, there are 31 segments of color representing each of the 31 characters in the title using my

mother's color code. The knots and different lengths correlate to Morse Code, allowing the potential for deciphering. The division of space and convoluted layers of coding on this taut cord create the tension and distance I sometimes feel when trying to communicate with my mother.

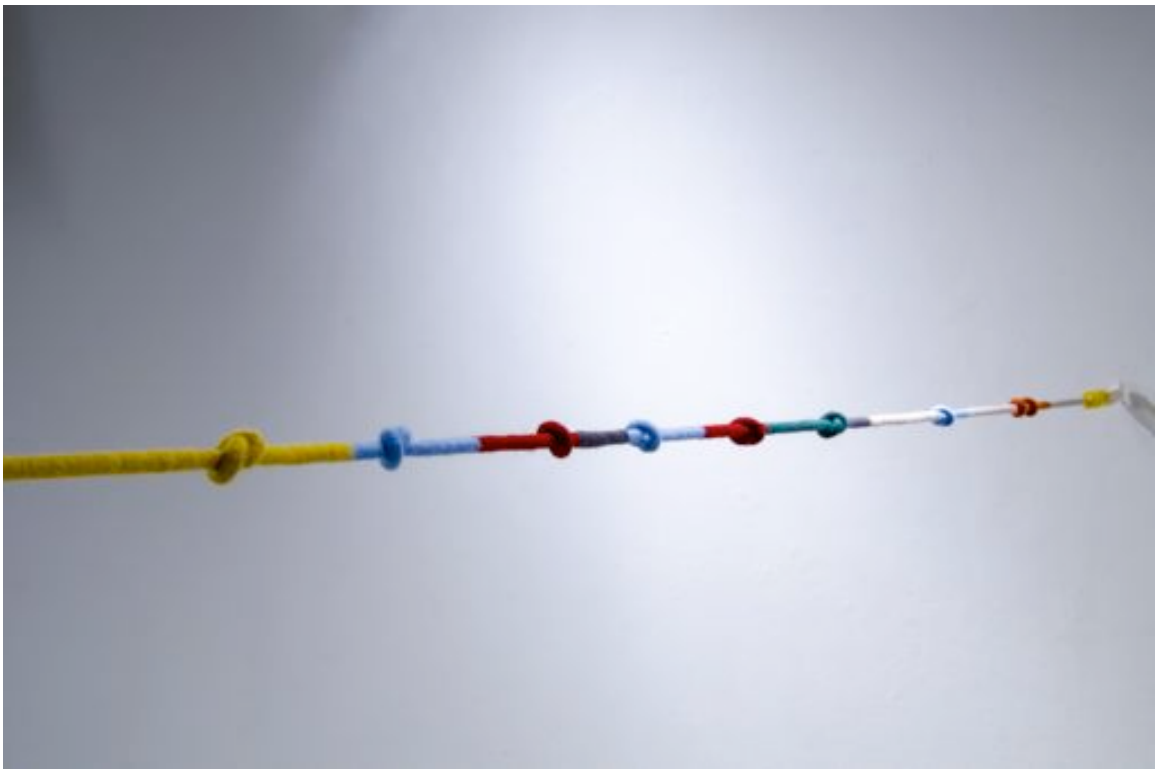

Fig. 10: *I So Do Not Want Any Of This For Any Of Us,* 2013

ATTEMPTS AT UNDERSTANDING (BRIAN)

I have an acquaintance, Brian Arnold, with a form of synesthesia, which he has yet to clearly identify for himself. While I cannot claim a diagnosis, I believe he has a rare form of synesthesia called emotionally-mediated synestheia where he relates emotion and personalities to color. [9] As explained by him;

> *"I want to clarify my experience of people by colors. By the way, it often is depressing because a big part of it is a kind of warning about people who are ill, and there is a lot of illness out there. So I will start with that; It's not like I see a color surrounding someone, but more like a deja vu experience where whenever I connect with someone on an emotional level I get one of about 5 or six colors, or a slight mixing of two colors, which indicates how that person experiences the world. For example, people generally tend to be what I have come to associate with yellow, often mixed with some orange which can become intensified to the point of red (rage). Blues to purple are illness for me and gray, green, and brown are complex and rare and I usually get them from people who seek to hide or mask their emotions. The colors are not like a background or anything that jumps out but more a feeling or pulse of heat that clearly identifies itself in my mind's eye with certain shades of certain colors. That's about as good as I can do describing it. It usually happens a lot when I first get close to someone, and then also in stressful situations where I get the colors later as I am processing our interaction."*[10]

Emotionally-mediated synesthesia is reading emotion as a color in another human. But emotion is typically a two way street, between two recipients. We figure out others

[9] Richard Cytowic , MD and David M. Eagleman, PhD *Wednesday Is Indigo Blue: Discovering The Brain of Synesthesia*, p. 24. Table 2.1 shows a chart of the frequencies of the different types of synesthesia. Data collected from Sean Day and correlated on this chart shows that the emotion>color and personality>color are anywhere between 1% and 5% of reported synesthetes, vs grapheme>color synesthesia which is more like 65%.

[10] Recorded in email correspondence between Leigh Suggs and Brian Arnold, dated September 25, 2012

through body language, inflection of voice, tone of voice, and other actions. Since another person's intentions cannot be clearly understood, it is certainly possible to mis-read someone. Brian's associations with color are completely self-referential – meaning his *own* emotional judgments trigger his colors, not the other person. What does make his experience similar to my mothers is that he clearly explains his experience as psychological ("my mind's eye") and not physically located on or around the person.

In both cases, language affects Brian's and my mother's descriptions of what they see. Their descriptions to me use words I have associations to, but I can never know precisely what they see. Is my mother's or Brian's color translucent, saturated, hazy, etc? Do their colors ever become darker or lighter? Does one color affect another if they are next to each other? Josef Albers clearly points out this distinction in his book *The Interaction of Color* by saying, "If one says 'red' - the name of color - and there are fifty people listening, it can be expected that there will be fifty reds in their minds. And one can be sure that all these reds will be very different."[11] How can eyes sense multiple facets of a color, the brain interpret these multiple facets, and then our language only have one word to describe it – RED? Yes, *dark* or *light* or another descriptor like *yellowy* can accompany the word red to try and clarify, but in the end, our general language becomes an inhibitor. Ludwig Wittgenstein, another color theorist and philosopher makes this statement when questioning our descriptions of color and objects; "Can't we imagine people having color concepts other than ours? And that in turn means: Can't we imagine people who do not have our color concepts but who have concepts which are related to ours in such a way that

we would also call them 'color concepts?' "[12] Wittgenstein's remarks seem to be nothing more than remarks, and not a definitive answer to his own questions about describing color or objects. But his point is clear, we cannot clearly communicate an individual experience of seeing to another because language condenses and compacts information. In essence, language begins to destroy "pure" seeing.

It seems inconsequential to me whether colors are a psychological association or a physical/location association in either my mothers case or Brian's case. Both instances reduce to a perceptive experience that alters the way one sees and the way one is visually conscious of an object. My mom cannot read without seeing the colors and Brian cannot see people without classifying them as a color. This *is* their "pure" way of seeing, and it has been their "pure" way of seeing as long as they can cognitively remember.

Brian not only shared with me his experience of seeing people in colors, but he also shared his recollection of "balloons" he would see as a child when laying down to sleep at night. Through discussion, we established our childhood experiences were similar - a form of phosphenes. He described his visions as red "balloons" always moving upwards as if floating towards the sky (unlike mine, which were blue). But, for Brian, these visions were very overwhelming, frightening and caused quite a bit of distress in his life. Brian's story moved me, and I made several drawings reinterpreting what he explained to me. Here are his words:

> *I would see red and blue balloons (dots) rising on a horizon (eyes closed). As the image grew stronger in my mind, I focused on it and I would begin to feel the vastness of what I now conceptualize as the universe, but back then was only an*

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[11] Albers, Josef. *Interaction of Color* , Yale University Press, 1963, P. 3
[12] Wittgenstein, Ludwig. *Remarks on Color.* P11e #66.

infinite void which frightened me so badly I would get out of my bed and get into my parent's. This happened enough to be a problem, but I never told any one! I remember feeling like I should not be having this experience and that it was wrong, something was wrong with me. That led me to try and "tough it out" on my own and stare into the void courageously. The more I did, the bigger the void got until I feared I would be swallowed by it and was not going to be able to get back to my bed, my room, or even my house. I think I was actually leaving my body and what I have learned as an adult and through years of the practice of meditation supports that idea. I still see the "balloons" sometimes when I am meditating or when I manage to really rest my mind (rare).

After several months of drawing, I sent Brian images of the work his story inspired. His response, "It doesn't look anything like mine, but I love the texture and contrast...really, yours is far more interesting and exciting visually."[13] His words and my image completely failed to communicate his visions.

[13] Recorded in email correspondence between Leigh Suggs and Brian Arnold, dated March, 2013

RECENT VISIONS

Alone by myself in a dark room, I often find myself seeing bright bursts of color. They are indescribable colors because they move so fast and are constantly changing. Is it possible to try to capture, or pause, or cause these visions to be still? On the morning of March 18th, 2014, I saw a series of undulating yellow/green blobs. They grew from the edges of my dark field of vision, and reduced down to a simple dot in the center of my field of vision. It was if I was moving backwards through space at a very fast rate, and the colors would quickly come into focus and then disappear.

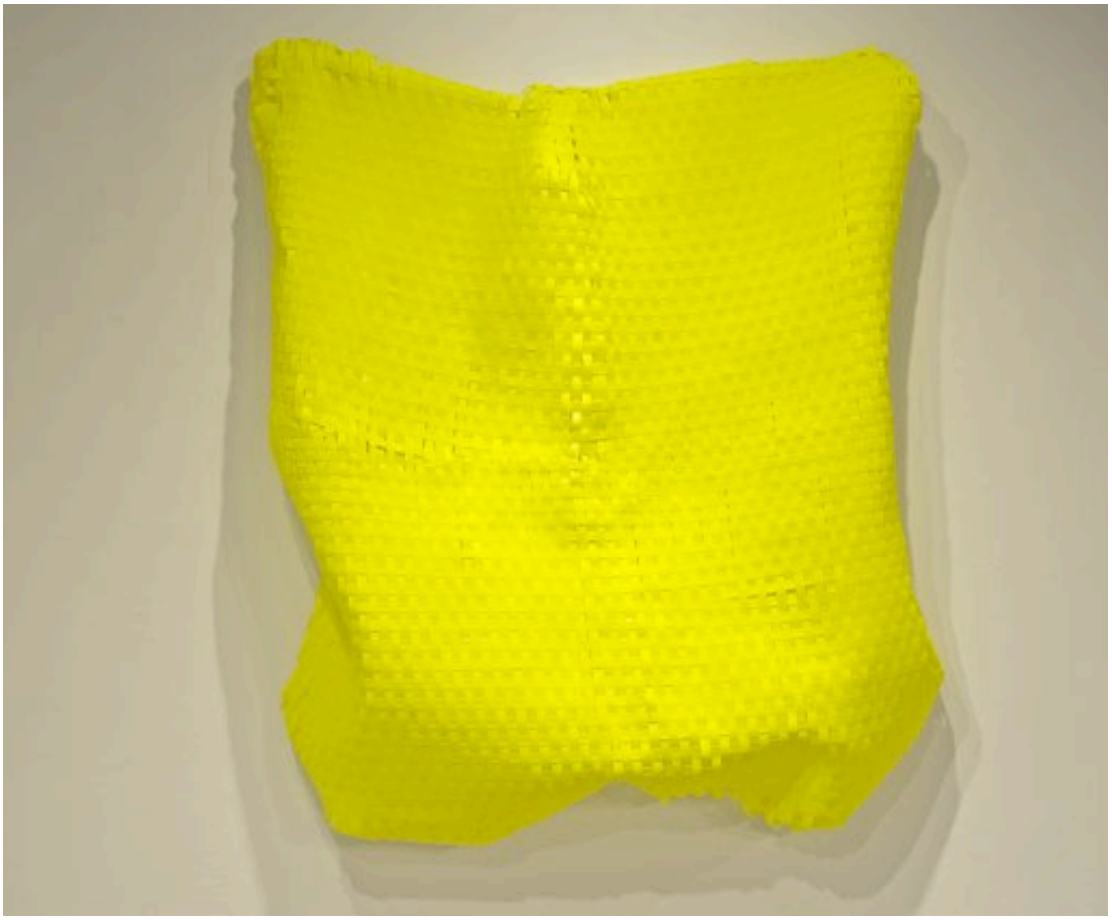

Fig. 11: *Early In The Morning, Eyes Closed,* 2014

I learned from this experience that I am a spectator of my closed eye visions, not a participator. These visions and images appeared before me as if they were outside of me, projected into external space– like a movie screen. These qualia experiences are always out of my control; shifting, flickering and transforming on their own accord. I am aware how deeply internal and singularly subjective my hallucinatory visions are; yet I know this is a common phenomena, experienced by nearly everyone.

Through rendering my transient visual phenomena into art objects, I am elucidating these experiences and making them accessible to my *open* eyes and to a viewers open eyes.

Deceptively simple and minimalistic in content, this work asked the viewer to be patient and contemplate what was happening. I explored movement, light, and translucency through the use of singular, pattern producing gestures. The intense, vibrant and luminous colors are a simultaneous reflection of physical and psychological states, which makes the work ocular and auric.

Fig. 12: *Staring At The Sun, Eyes Closed, 20 Seconds,* 2014

NO VISIONS

As mentioned in Chapter 2, some of my earliest memories are of closed eye visions and phantoms of circles, lines, and dots that would undulate and pulse behind my eyelids. I could simply see them by closing my eyes, whether in the dark or in the light. I did not need light or outside visual stimulation. My dots were typically vibrant royal blue, and the lines and circles changed between shades of yellow/green and white. I often saw the royal blue dots by themselves as a child, similar to a zoomed in version of "white noise."[14] But now they are sparser and intermingled with the circles and lines that appear to me as yellow/green and white. This phenomenon is known as phosphenes.

Phosphenes happen without the experience of seeing light or without light actually entering the eye or the optic nerve. The word *phosphene* comes from the Greek words *phos* (light) and *phainein* (to show)[15] and they are a type of closed-eye hallucination.

What if optical input is turned off in a seeing person? – or in other words, what if blindness is mechanically induced? Gerald Oster, who wrote extensively about phosphenes explains it as such: "to exclude any optical inputs one must enter a totally dark room or wear a light-tight blindfold. However, once this is carried out, visual perception does not end; there is not an impression of total blackness. Once the eye has become adapted to the darkness, and particularly if one relaxes, the visual field lights up: wispy

[14] Definition of White Noise on Wikipedia: "In signal processing, white noise is a random signal with a constant power spectral density." http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/White_noise

clouds and moving specks of light appear, generally in pastel shades of blue, green, orange and yellow…. These subjective images resulting from the self-illumination, as it were, of the visual sense, are called phosphenes."[16] He continues, because phosphenes originate within the eye and the brain, they are a perceptual phenomenon common to all mankind (past and present, one assumes). Because phosphenetic patterns can be intimately related to the eye and to a visual field, they become a psychological and aesthetic anomaly. While this does link human vision to a universal connection, it does not eliminate the singularly subjective patterns produced by each person.[17]

If physical color is removed (or our eyes are closed), our brain automatically begins to re-create and replace color for us. I began thinking of the notion of "no sight" or "no vision." What does it mean to have no vision? Is the act of closing your eyes mean that there is no vision? Is the act of not seeing a direct object no vision? Is a reflection a real vision? The progression of my research turned me towards reflective surfaces - specifically silver metallic surfaces. While silver is not exactly a mirror, it points towards the idea of reflecting back. It is a light reflecting material that does not preserve the original image other than the color and the diffused light. In other words, it accurately reflects any color that is in front of it, but not necessarily the fine details of the object. If you are looking at a reflection of something, you are no longer looking at the object – rendering it once removed and less like the original object. But, without reflection we

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[15] http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Phosphene

[16] Oster, Gerald, "Phosphenes" *Scientific American,* Volume 222 issue 2*,* 1970. P 83

[17] Phosphene parties were evidently high fashion in the 18th century. It is described as an event where a circle of people holding hands would be shocked by a high-voltage electrostatic generator, so that phosphenes were created each time the circuit was completed.

would only be able to see light-emitting objects. The visibility of objects, excluding light-emitting ones, is primarily caused by diffuse reflection of light: it is diffusely-scattered light that forms the image of the object in the observer's eye.

I turned toward the silver works of Anish Kapoor, such as the Cloud Gate in Chicago and his Untitled stainless steel sculptures, to investigate how they reflect a disoriented view of the space they are contained within.

Fig. 13: *Untitled*, 2009 Anish Kapoor

Fig. 14: *Untitled*, 2006 Anish Kapoor

The intricately pieced mirrored works of Monir Shahroudy Farmanfarmaian have also been a huge influence. The geometric surfaces that she creates using mirror and plaster evoke similar phospene-like responses for me. The way the lines are form between the pieces, and the sparks of light that glitter as you move across the surfaces all remind me of what I see behind my eyelids.

Fig. 15: From Monir's "Convertibles and Polygons" Collection

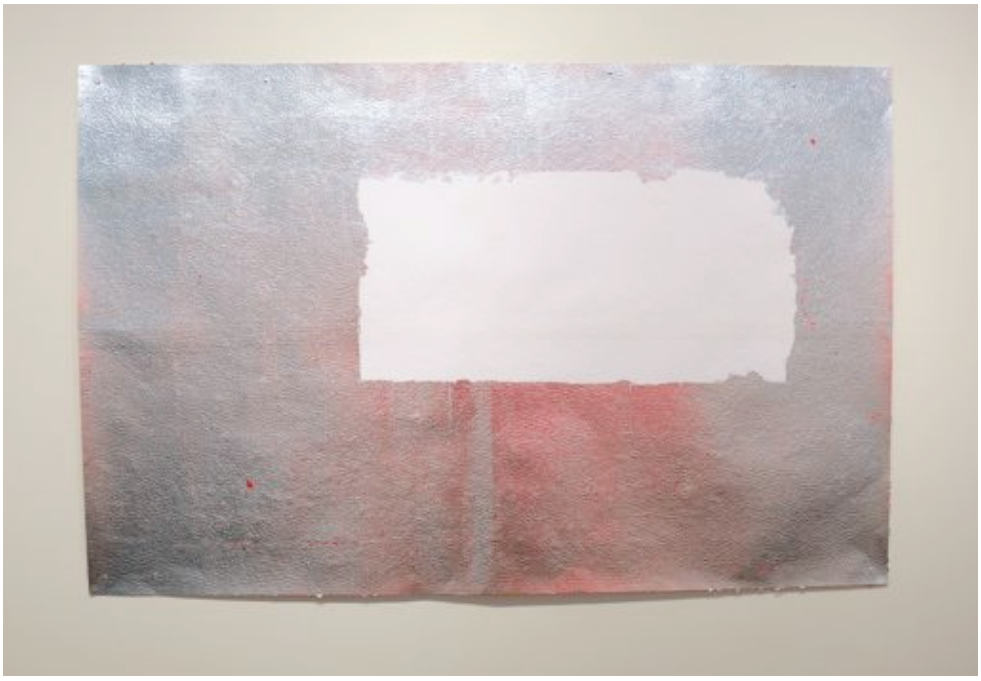

Fig. 16: *What I See Is What I Thought I Saw,* 2014
(Reflection of *Staring At the Sun, Eyes Closed, 20 Seconds* can be seen here)

Fig. 17: *You're Always In My Mirror,* 2014

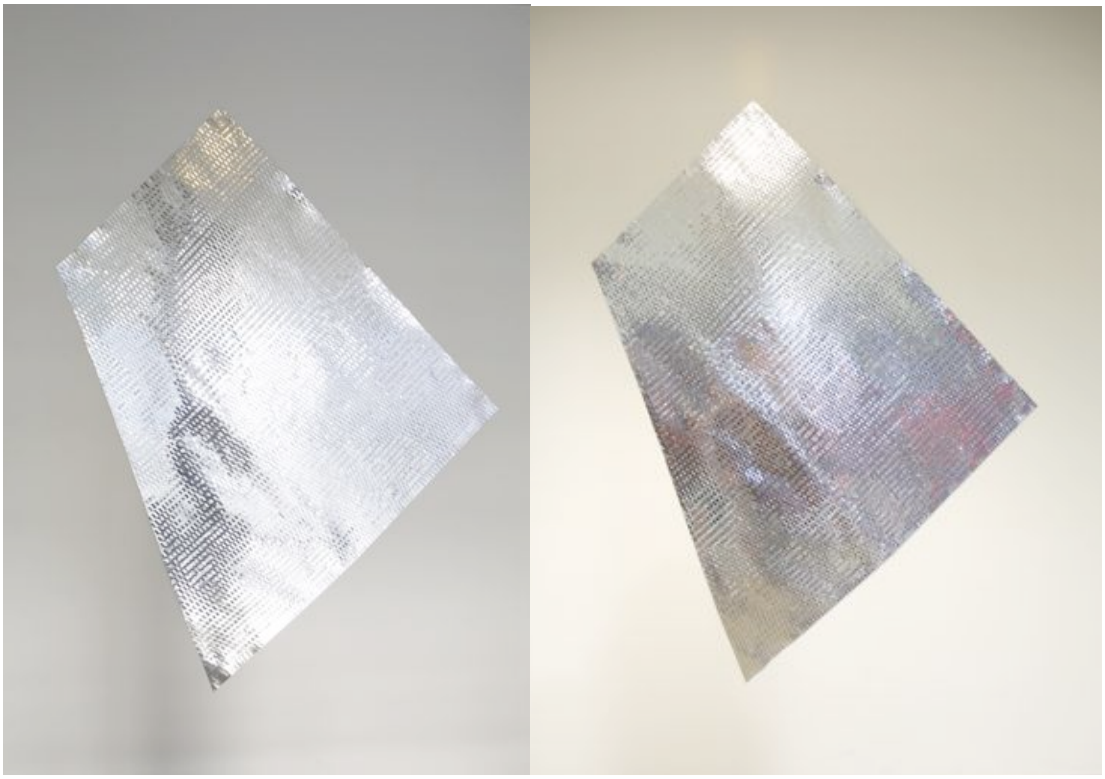

Fig 18: *A Color Shines*, 2015 (day time/day light view) *A Color Shines*, 2015 (night time/florescent light view)

TRAPPED VISIONS

I now believe that one can trust their own eyes; an individual needs to believe they see what they need to see. Within a "pure" moment of seeing, an individual comprehends enough information to identify their surroundings. As soon as an individual tries to explain what they see or try to draw a picture, the description immediately fails at purely translating their experience. A complete description with words or with imagery of a color or an object is impossible. Language and imagery compress and reduce an experience due to their own limitations; rendering it completely different from its originator. We are constantly bearing witness to the inexpressible, and this fleeting moment of pure seeing is something we should all revel in.

Our eyes and our field of vision are our body's architecture - as portal – window, door, or passageway. They provide an opening to the world, a frame or structure to how we see the world. Each of us "build" a singular and specific structure to exist within based on individual needs. The eyes are a portal to the world and "since the Greeks, philosophical writings…have abounded with ocular metaphors to the point that knowledge has become analogous with clear vision and light is regarded as the metaphor for truth… The eyes are the organic prototype of philosophy. Their enigma is that they not only can see but are also able to see themselves seeing. This gives them prominence among the body's cognitive organs. A good part of philosophical thinking is actually only eye reflex,

eye dialectic, seeing-oneself-see."[18]

My childhood home and the architectural frame works of doors and windows became a fixation of mine. Other than my blue circles and dots, those frames are some of the most vivid and imprinted memories I have. It became clear to me that the two doors at the top of the stairs looked very similarly to a pair of eyes, and the two windows in my room also looked very similarly to a pair of eyes. Perhaps these sets of two have been insolubly and permanently imbedded into my eyes and quite possibly another reason why I am so fixated on what it means to see.

Fig 19. *This Thing That Just Was (Part I & Part II).* The doorways that existed at the top of the stairs, one leading to my room, and the other to my sister's room. To the left, is the outside frame of my bedroom window. Architectural scale is accurate and replicated.

[18] Pallasmaa, Juhani, *The Eyes of the Skin,* Part I p.15
http://www.arch.ttu.edu/courses/2008/summer/practicum/Reading%20Resources/The%20Eyes%20of%20the%20Skin%20by%20Juhani%20Pallasmaa.pdf

Fig 20. Detail & side view of *This Thing That Just Was (Part I)*. The blush seen around the rim of the doors is to mimic the reddish pink color that surrounds the human eye.

Fig 21. *This Thing That Just Was (Part I & Part II)*

Fig 22. *This Thing That Just Was (Part III)*. My first attempt at recreating my bedroom window from memory. Architectural scale is guessed and estimated here.

As stated by Peter Zumthor in *Thinking Architecture*, "Architecture has it's own realm. It has a special physical relationship with life. I do not think of it primarily as either a message or a symbol, but as an envelope and background for life which goes on in and around it, a sensitive container for the rhythm of footsteps on the floor, for the concentration of work, and for the silence of sleep."[19] So if our eyes are the architecture, they are not only they symbol of sight, they are the envelope for life and they are the container of which we exist within.

[19] Zumthor, Peter. *Thinking Architecture,* Lars Muller Publishers, Switzerland, 1998. P.13

TRYING TO EXIT HERE

Trying to Exit Here, my thesis show, is a culmination of explorations on vision. I wanted the work to exist in the realm of suspended space and get closer to "pure" sight. It was my intention to create an environment where the viewer could put their minds eye on hold for a moment, and try to see only what was in front of them. By using bright colors, reflective surfaces, and lighting techniques I was able to confront the viewer with the question, "what am I really seeing"?

Similar to Piet Mondrian's works post 1920, I attempted to take color to extremes. These extremes were over-saturation of color and the complete absence of color. During his time, Mondrian was deconstructing images and objects, and taking them back to their basic ingredients - horizontal and vertical lines and primary colors of yellow, blue, and red [fig. 23]. He also focused on the spaces between lines and borders, rendering the empty space just as important as the lines themselves.

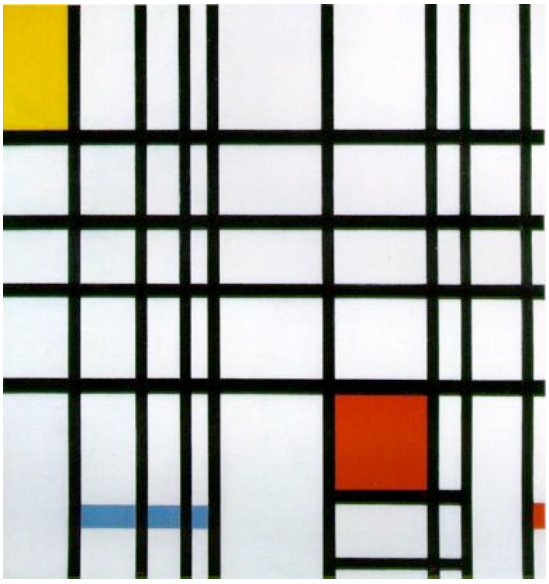

Fig 23: *Composition with Yellow, Blue and Red*, Piet Mondrian, 1937-1942

In the same way, my thesis show returned back to my visual basics. I revisited my closed eye hallucinations of dots, because they are a part of me, and will forever be imprinted in my mind. Whether they are of sight or memory, they are lasting impressions that will constantly bring me pleasure. By using florescent yellow for *The Ease of Seeing* [fig. 24], an extremely intense color for the eye to digest, I challenged the viewer's eye to settle into a discomfort. The perforated surface combined with the highlights and shadows began to confuse the eye by pushing the background into the foreground and the foreground into the background. Surprisingly, once the eye adjusted, the yellow toned down and became the constant in the room - reflecting onto the floor and onto the adjacent silver pieces and casting an ever slight yellow haze throughout the room

Fig 24: *The Ease of Seeing*

The silver work in my thesis show became a stand for a mirror, movie screen, large-scale window or panorama vista. The reflectiveness of silver symbolized a cyclical

effect – is one seeing in or is one seeing out? This cyclical effect also points back towards my continuing use of the circle as an object within my work.

My largest silver piece, *Trying to Exit Here,* spanned the entire length of the longest wall within my space. As the viewer moved past the piece and their eyes gazed across the surface, they noticed all the primary colors were present: red reflecting onto the piece from another room, the yellow reflecting from *The Ease of Seeing,* and the blue coming from a seemingly unknown source (a blue gel was placed in an obscure ceiling light) [fig. 25]. The colors were elusive, they shifted and changed as one moved throughout the space. The colors came to the work; they were not in the work; they reflect back at you. The eyes are processing a deep space or panorama without anything being in front of them but a silver object.

Fig 25: *Trying To Exit Here*

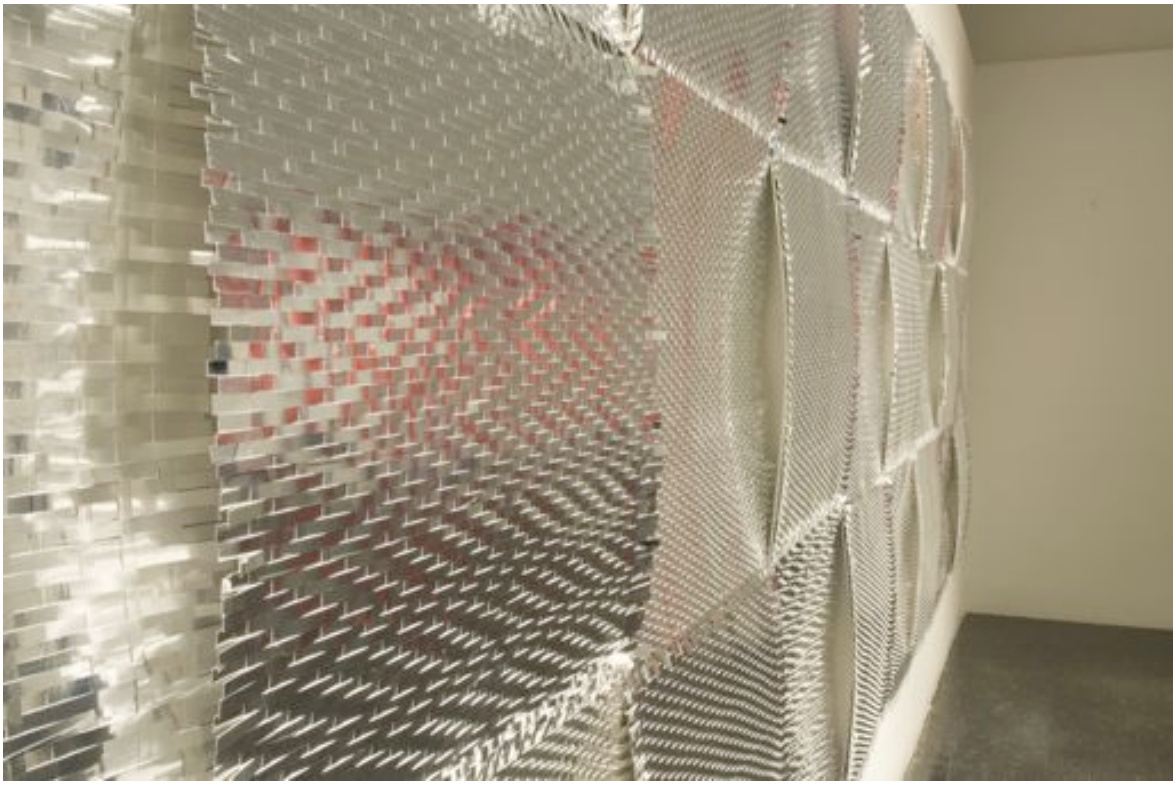

Fig 26: Detail of *Trying To Exit Here*

The smaller framed works residing on the opposing walls from *Trying To Exit Here,* were all entitled *Rearview.* They acted as reflectors, or smaller mirrors to peer into once the viewer was on the opposite side of the room. These works on paper are another part of my studio practice and essential to understanding my entire process. They are pieces that stand alone, but they also act as smaller studies for my larger objects [fig 27-28].

Vision is a miraculous thing. It is an evolutionary gift that is essential to each of its possessors. While the constructs of societal standards, like language and imagery, allow us to find common ground with one another, it is a unique and individual personal experience that is vast and full of astounding mysteries.

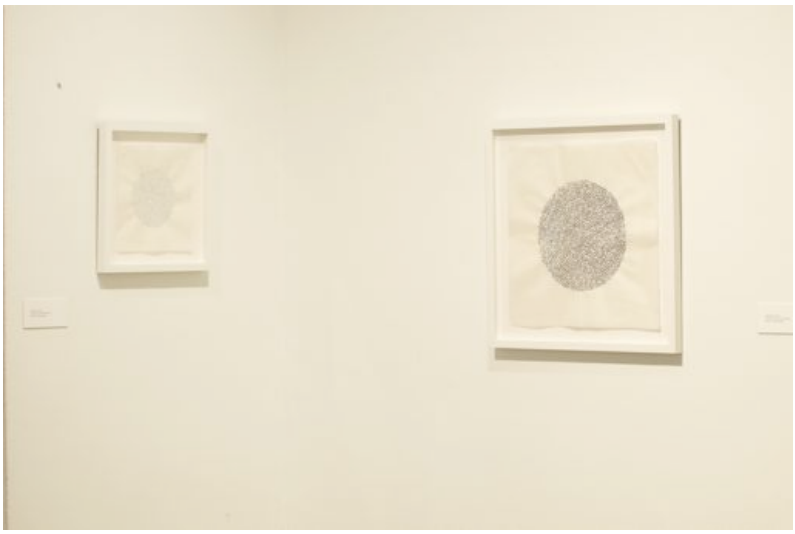

Fig 27: *Rearview II & III*

Fig 28: *Rearview (Elliptical)*

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VITA

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Education
2015 MFA,Virginia Commonwealth University – Richmond, VA

2003 BFA-Highest Honors, University of North Carolina-CH - Chapel Hill, NC

Selected Shows/Exhibitions

2015 Leigh Suggs, *Solo Show,* LIGHT Art + Design, Chapel Hill, NC (expected)
Leigh Suggs, *Solo Show,* Horace Williams Gallery, Chapel Hill, NC (expected)
Summer Show, Group Show, Reynolds Gallery, Richmond, VA (expected)
Trying To Exit Here, *MFA Thesis show*, Anderson Gallery, Richmond, VA
LIGHT 4, *Group Show*, LIGHT Art + Design, Chapel Hill, NC
2014 METAL IV, *Group Show*, LIGHT Art + Design, Chapel Hill, NC
Following Threads, *Group Show,* Greenhill Center for Art, Greensboro, NC
FIBER OPTIONS, *Juried Show,* Maryland Federation of Art Circle Gallery, Annapolis, MD
Leigh Suggs & Ippy Patterson, *Two Person Show*, LIGHT Art + Design, Chapel Hill, NC
Where Words Are Not Enough, *Group Show,* Artspace, Richmond, VA
GROW, *Group Show*, LIGHT Art + Design, Chapel Hill, NC
Black White Blue, *Group Show*, LIGHT Art + Design, Chapel Hill, NC
NCAC Fellowship Exhibition, *Group Show,* Contemporary Art Museum, Raleigh, NC
2013 The Contemporaries**,** *Group Show*, LIGHT Art + Design, Chapel Hill, NC
STITCH, *Group Show*, LIGHT Art + Design, Chapel Hill, NC
Jimmy Fountain & Leigh Suggs, *Two Person Show*, LIGHT Art + Design, Chapel Hill, NC
2012 Art on Paper, *Group Show*, Weatherspoon Art Museum, Greensboro, NC
Leigh Suggs: Red White Black and Blue *Solo Show,* LIGHT Art + Design, Chapel Hill, NC
ILLUME**,** *Group Show,* LIGHT Art + Design, Chapel Hill, NC
2011 Books & Broadsides *Juried Show,* Ackland Museum Store, Chapel Hill, NC
Returning Bowl | Live Relic, *Group Show,* Alcott Gallery, Chapel Hill, NC
RE *Group Show,* LIGHT Art + Design, Chapel Hill, NC
PULP**,** *Juried Show*, Visual Art Exchange, Raleigh, NC
Perseveration: Persistent Repetition, *Solo Show*, Room 100, Durham, NC

New Work: Grid References, *Solo Show*, The Nevica Project, Chicago, IL
For the Birds *Group Show,* LIGHT Art + Design, Chapel Hill, NC

2010 Winter Show *Group Show,* The Greenhill Center for Art, Greensboro, NC
Elemental, *Group Show*, LIGHT Art + Design, Chapel Hill, NC

2009 Opening, *Group Show*, Sitzer Spuria Studios, Carrboro, NC
Collect, *Group Show,* The Nevica Project, Chicago, IL

Publications / Selected Press

2014 "Four Artists Augment Drawings with Related Practices" *Winston Salem Journal*, Tom Patterson, October 12
"At CAM, NC's Commitment to the Arts" *The Herald Sun*, April 3
"Artist Fellowship Exhibition Showcases Technology, Multimedia Work at CAM" Press Release NCAC, February 6

2013 Featured on *Mint Design Blog,* February 5

2012 "DOTS & LOOPS: The Precision Tools of Leigh Suggs" *Indy Weekly*, September 19
"Leigh Suggs Solo Exhibition" *Chapel Hill Weekly,* September 7
"North Carolina Artist Leigh Suggs" *Helen Hiebert blog*, September 5

2011 Featured on *The Best Part* blog, April 12

2010 Featured on *OK Great!* Blog, October 1

Workshops, Classes, & Residencies

2015 *Talking With Beads* Teaching Assistant to Sonya Clark, Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, VA
*Arrowmont 2D Pentaculum***,** Participant, Arrowmont School of Arts & Crafts Gatlinburg, TN

2014 *Paper in Multiple Dimensions* Adjunct Faculty, Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, VA
Intermediate & Advanced Weaving Teaching Assistant to Susan Iverson, Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, VA

2013 *Beginning Weaving (Tapestry)* Teaching Assistant to Susan Iverson, Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, VA

2011 *Structuring Lines* Assistant for Jerry Bleem, Penland School of Crafts, Penland, NC
Winter Printmaking Residency, Penland School of Crafts, Penland, NC

2002 Work Study at Dieu Donne, New York, NY

Awards/Grants

2015 Graduate Thesis Research Grant, Virginia Commonwealth University

2014 Graduate Assistantship for Sonya Clark, Virginia Commonwealth University

2013 Graduate Teaching Fellowship, Virginia Commonwealth University

2012 North Carolina Arts Council Artist Fellowship Grant Recipient

2003 Penland School of Crafts Scholarship – UNC-CH
John and June Alcott Travel Award – UNC-CH

2002 George Kachergis Memorial Scholarship – UNC-CH

Collections

Markel Corporate Collection
Fidelity Investments Corporate Collection
Private Collections in Chapel Hill, NC, Durham, NC, Chicago, IL, Greensboro, NC, Brooklyn, NY, and New York, NY

Committees & Boards

2013 See & Hear co-founder**,** A collaborative series by Leigh Suggs, Charlie Hearon & David Winton, promoting local artists & musicians within the same venue
2012 CAM ArtHouse Auction Committee, Contemporary Art Museum Raleigh, NC
2011 CAM/now Young Professionals Steering Committee, Contemporary Art Museum Raleigh, NC
2010 Co-Organizer of designSPARK, a division of SPARKcon, Raleigh, NC
CAM/now Young Professionals Steering Committee, Contemporary Art Museum Raleigh, NC
2009 CAM/now Young Professionals Steering Committee, Contemporary Art Museum Raleigh, NC